

BESTSELLING AUTHORS
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ROAD TRIP ROMANCE



ROAD TRIP ROMANCE

A Rom-Com Novella

ANNE WELCH
ANNA KRISTELL

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Chapter One

Lucy

MY NAME IS LUCY. I LIVE IN THE SUNSHINE STATE OF FLORIDA with my husband, Joe. I'm a full-time writer, and our little cottage by the ocean the perfect place for me to do my thing. Well, full time when I'm not hanging out at the beach, working on my tan, that is. I love to walk along the shore, and Joseph and I adore all the little seaside bars and restaurants.

I have a friend named Linda. Funny thing about Linda and me, we're as different as night and day in some ways but like sisters in others. Linda is younger than I am, only a few years older than my grown children. I'm a stay at home, retired from the work force writer, and she's a single, career gal who writes in her spare time, when she isn't looking for her next guy to duct tape. Private joke, there. I should have said her Mr. Right.

We have known each other since 2013, when I was a new and very green writer, and she knew several successful authors already. One day, she offered to become my personal assistant. Well, I was still working full time back then, and she worked at home, so I said, "Okay, we'll give it a shot."

Hmm, yeah, well, that's when it all began. Linda wasn't writing yet back then. She was an avid reader with a secret longing to write. She'd befriended several authors and was well liked by all. Her sense of humor endeared her to everyone.

Linda suggested that I start attending author events and signings. I'd been invited to one, but I knew next to nothing about these things. That's where her expertise came in. She arranged for me to attend several, and we traveled to them together. Road trips, oh my, I had no idea what I was getting myself into, traveling with this lady. We could have been Thelma and Louise, or Lucy and Ethel, that's how crazy our travels were.

Our first trip was to Arkansas, of all places. I met up with Linda and she drove from her place. Oh, yeah, she lives by the beach, too, but in a condo in South Carolina. Back then, we both lived in different states, and it made sense for me to meet her at her house. She preferred to drive. That's a control thing, but you'll hear more about that later. To travel with Linda is a whole new experience, from her serenading me in the car to the two of us phoning other folks in the book world we know to chat with while we're driving. Oh, and bridges. The girl hates them!

Anyway, after that trip, on which some very funny things happened—and of course, they made it to Facebook—we made several others together, each one funnier than the last. We've gone away for a weekend just to write, we've attended big events, small events, and we've just hung out at her house and watched old movies until all hours of the night. Then she moved and was no longer three hours away from me. But a year later, I moved. Now, it's a mere four-hour drive.

Anyway, to get on with the story, Linda called me the other day and told me about an event in California, of all places. Well, Linda doesn't fly. No way, no how, so that

meant, if we intended to go, we'd have to drive all the way across the country.

I'm always up for a road trip, but did I really want to go all the way across the country? With Linda? What sort of trouble would we get into along the way? With the Double L gals, you never knew. All I know is this: all those friends who said they'd bail us out if we ever needed it had better be saving their money.

I knew I needed to talk it over with Joseph before I gave her an answer. After all, this would affect both of us financially, and more importantly, it would mean being apart for a whole month. Linda had a month's vacation built up, and she intended to use it all on this trip, taking our time driving out there, attending the event, sightseeing, and then the drive back. Don't get me wrong, my better half would never tell me I couldn't go, it's just that he doesn't like to be away from me. For a day or two, he's fine. He actually enjoys the peace and quiet, but any more than that and he's more than ready for me to come home. Joseph and I have been together less than three years. We grew up together, had both moved on, led separate lives, and reconnected in our golden years. We both know that time is a precious commodity.

After a lengthy discussion, we agreed that I would call Linda back and tell her I would go with her. We spent an hour on the phone making arrangements. In two weeks' time, I would be back on the road. California, here we come!

I spent the next two weeks catching up on all my work, cleaning the house, doing all the laundry, and filling the refrigerator and pantry with food for my man. Finally, it was time to pack.

For two entire days, I agonized about what to take with me. How many pairs of shoes could I fit into one suitcase? I have a shoe fetish, you see. I see a pair I like, and I buy them. I have different shoes for different outfits. Doesn't

everybody? So, I called Linda to see how much stuff we could cram into her car. I finally decided that besides all my books, swag, banners and such, I could take one big suitcase with clothes and another smaller one with shoes. I only hoped I had chosen well. We also each packed a small bag with toiletries and clothes for the night, so we wouldn't have to carry our big bags in every night. We would refill it each morning before we hit the road.

I bought snacks for the road, knowing Linda would do the same. We had planned out our stops, I had gone to the bank, and I was ready to go.

I didn't sleep more than two hours the night before we left. Joseph was ready to tell me to get in the car and head out, I was so antsy.

The big day had arrived. Linda was due to pick me up at eleven. I was ready and pacing the floor by ten. I checked my bags at least ten times to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. Joseph was rolling his eyes at me by the fifth time. My daughter phoned to tell me to have a good time. My bonus daughter called, my son texted, and my brother told me to be safe. But where was Linda? The other half of the Double L team was late!

Finally, she pulled up in front of my place, where I was out having a cig while nervously pacing back and forth waiting for her. I had imagined all sorts of things, because, well, I'm a mom and a nana, so therefore, I'm also a worrier.

She got out and shook her finger at me. "When you gonna quit that nasty habit?" she asked.

"When people quit stressing me out," I retorted as I ground out my cig and led her inside.

"What? I had to stop and use the restroom. I'm here now. Let me go in and say hi to Daddy Joe and we'll get on our way."

Yeah, she thinks of us as an adoptive set of parents and we are old enough to have a kid her age, so there you have it.

Joe had bottles of cold water ready for us to take with us. He's thoughtful like that. They sparred back and forth a few times, which is normal for the two of them, then we all started carrying my things to her SUV.

"Think you brought enough?" Linda asked.

"You know me," I shot back with a laugh.

She shook her head at me again, and I could see that we were getting off to a great start. Linda and I have this really strange relationship. We can tell each other secrets and we have each other's back, but we also have our little tiffs, as others well know. I don't know how many times she's threatened to throw me out of the car. Someone asked us once if we were sisters. We laughed and told her yes, sisters from another mother. But it's all in fun. She would never really throw me out of the car. At least, I don't think she would.

We finally got the last of my luggage and books in the back and she closed the door. I kissed Joseph goodbye, promised to call him regularly, and got in on the passenger side. That's another thing about traveling with Linda—she rarely lets anyone else drive, which is fine with me.

So, now we were finally on our way. It was nearly lunchtime, so we decided to top off the gas tank and grab some fast food in a drive-through before we hit the interstate.

We planned to drive until around eight that night, hoping we'd be able to find a room somewhere along the way. We had a full tank of gas and chicken sandwiches in our hands. It was time to start our newest adventure.

We caught up on each other's news while we ate. Linda turned on her playlist and started singing along while we drove. By now, we'd made it to I-10 and could relax until time to start looking for exits again. We were hoping to make it to someplace in Mississippi or Louisiana, so we drove as long as we could before we stopped for a break.

After filling up with gas and grabbing some food, we were back on the road again. I hadn't told Linda yet, but I was in the process of giving up the cigs on this trip. From what I'd read, though, it wouldn't be a good idea to do this cold turkey while we were traveling together, so I had decided to do what the doctor had suggested and taper down slowly. We'd see if she noticed.

We decided to check in with Linda's dad to see how he was doing. He was visiting with some friends, so we didn't chat with him for long. The fur babies were fine, too. Then we called Joe, to let him know where we were. He thought we were making pretty good time. It was his day off, so he was taking it easy and was going out to dinner with his nephew later. Next, we called our friend, Deb, to catch up with her. She was happy to hear from us and we were able to pass some time with her for a while until she had to start dinner.

After that, it was getting late in the day and we were almost through the great state of Mississippi, so we decided to start looking for a place to lay our heads for the night. We wanted to get an early start the next day, so it was time to stretch out on a bed and watch some TV. Linda and I like to watch *The Golden Girls* reruns when we are in a hotel, so hopefully, the motel would have a channel that carried the show.

I had some points saved for Holiday Inn, so we found a Holiday Inn Express and stopped to see if they had a vacancy. We were in luck. They had a room with two queen beds, which was perfect. We checked in, then we carried in what we would need for the night. We were so glad we had those separate, smaller bags, so we didn't have to carry in our bigger suitcases every night. That was a godsend. I couldn't face lugging in everything for one night.

It wasn't long before we got into our shorts and tee shirts, which is what we usually sleep in when we're on the road. Linda got settled in her bed while I called Joseph to

let him know we'd stopped for the night when I went out to have a cig. Then, it was time to relax, watch TV, and discuss the next day's travels. We both fell asleep pretty quickly. I'd say the trip was off to a good start.

The next morning, Linda got up and took her shower. She is used to getting up early. I am not. That should tell you something right there. I am definitely not a morning person. It's so bad that Joseph has gotten into the habit of making the coffee and carrying my first cup to me before I even get out of bed. Spoiled wife, you say? Not at all. He does it for his own safety. Anyway, I knew Miss Linda wasn't going to do that for me, so I forced myself to get up and make a cup in the coffee pot provided in our room. I was savoring my second cup when Linda came out of the shower.

"I'm going down to breakfast. You need to be ready when I get back, chick. I'll bring you some fruit and a cinnamon roll."

I saluted her and said, "Yes, Captain."

She smirked at me and left the room. I had some time, so I finished my coffee, then I stepped out for a cig. It was going well, in my opinion. I was down to just about five a day now. I hoped to be down to zero by the time we got home from California.

When I finished my morning poison, I went back in to take a quick shower, letting my short hair air dry while I finished getting ready. I was just closing my bag when Linda came back. She handed me my food and took the bags to the car while I ate. We got back on the road, stopping first at the gas station right by the entrance ramp to the interstate to fuel up. I got another cup of coffee, and she got a Five Hour Energy.

Now, it was eight o'clock, and we were on our way. I didn't know how far we'd get that day, but I was hopeful we'd make good time. We still had a good two thousand miles to go. Of course, we'd allowed time for the drive and

even some sightseeing along the way, but I wanted to get to Cali at least a day before the event started to get rested up. Traveling is hard on these old bones.

Things were going pretty well. We drove until noon, when we decided to stop at a "real" restaurant instead of doing fast food. We were in Lake Charles, Louisiana and ready to get out of the car for a while. We opted for a well-known chain rather than a local place. Linda is a picky eater, due to food allergies, and I can't do spicy because of acid reflux. Yeah, we're real fun to travel with.

An hour later, we were back on the road for the next lap of the trip. It was time to check in with her dad and my hubby.

I had noticed the same car following us for some time, so I mentioned it to Linda.

"Have you noticed that vehicle in your rearview?" I asked.

She looked and gasped loudly.

"What?" I wanted to know.

"If I didn't know it was impossible, I'd say that looks like hot neighbor's car."

"Wishful thinking," I teased. "Just keep an eye out for it. It's been staying behind us ever since we got back on the road after lunch."

Great! A stalker on the road. Just what The Double L's needed in their lives.

Chapter Two

Linda

MY NAME IS LINDA. I LIVE IN MYRTLE BEACH, SOUTH CAROLINA, and I own a small condo right on the ocean. I am single but consistently looking for my husband. I'm an aspiring author who runs a medical billing company to pay the bills. One day, I hope to be like my friend Lucy. She's happily married and a full-time author. She lives four hours away from me, in Florida. I met Lucy through Facebook and offered to be her personal assistant. Luckily for me, she agreed to give me a try. That was almost seven years ago. We are total opposites. She's older, wiser, and treats me like one of her own children. I give her a hard time about that, but secretly, I love it. She's been my biggest encourager in my writing journey.

I feel like I helped her grow her fan base by encouraging her to attend author signings. These events are amazing. You interact with the people who read your work. I feel like a rock star when someone tells me my words touched them. Most authors are very solitary people. So when I get a chance to interact with other authors and readers, I jump on it.

"Dad, put your pants on!" Oh, yeah, did I mention my father lives with me?

We lost my mom several years ago. Dad lived on his own until about a year ago. His health took a turn, so I had him move in with me. He's doing much better these days. So much better, in fact, I must keep a tight leash on him. All the single widow ladies are always coming over, bringing him casseroles and pound cake. His dating life is better than mine. A breathing male over seventy is a hot commodity around these parts. Little known fact is most people who own condos at the beach don't live at the beach. They rent them out most of the year. On this floor of the complex, the only other full-time person is hot neighbor.

Who is hot neighbor, you ask? He is only the sexiest man I've ever seen, and oh, he smells so good. The first time I saw him, I nearly passed out. He was wearing a pair of butt hugging jeans and a blue tank top. His muscles were rippling as he carried boxes into his condo. He was over six feet tall and had a head full of dark blond hair. His eyes were such a clear shade of green, I could see my reflection in them. I swear my panties just about fell off.

When hot neighbor first moved in, I made it my life's mission to win him over. It began with little love notes. I texted him: *when I think about you, I touch myself.*

He replied: *me too, on my temples; you give me a migraine.*

There was one time when I was outside his condo door eating a banana, trying to get him to notice me. But he just closed his blinds. I used some of my best moves, but nothing I did seemed to work. It just meant I needed to work harder to win him over.

On his birthday one year, I sent him some classy nude photos of myself, but the next day he returned them. Then there was the time I dressed up as the Easter Bunny and asked him to find my eggs. Again, he declined. This time it included a love note, well, a restraining order. You would think that would have been the final straw. But alas, I saw

him with another woman. I knew then, I had to leave him alone. After all, I was tired of his mixed signals anyway.

That very next day, I received a message from my PA, Maddie. Apparently, there was a huge book signing event coming up, and she insisted that Lucy and I should attend. The only problem was it was across the country, in California, and if there is one thing I do not do, it's fly. Nope. I flat out refuse to step foot on an airplane. I texted Maddie back and said she had lost her mind. But she can be persistent. She told me that several authors I idolized would be there, signing. It was such a great opportunity that we couldn't turn it down.

Finally, I relented. I told her to sign Lucy and me up and we would drive out there. Lucy and I always have a blast on our road trips anyway. Besides, the timing was perfect. I could take a break from hot neighbor. Maybe some separation would let him see what he was missing. Now, I just had to convince Lucy. Oh, and find someone to watch Dad and the fur babies.

That could be a problem. I mean, he could stay by himself, but I might not have a house to come home to.

I decided to call my sister, Brenda. She lives a few hours away, in Tennessee, with her husband. My niece, her daughter, is in her final year of college. So, I knew my sister should be able to get away. After all, she loves the beach more than I do.

"Hello."

"Brenda, it's your sister. How are you?"

We spent the next few minutes catching up on each other's lives before I asked her, "How would you like a free trip to the beach?"

"What's the catch?" Brenda asked me.

"Well, you see, I have this amazing opportunity to sign at a huge book event in California, but I need someone to stay with Dad."

"That's great, sis. I am proud of you. Wait, California? How will you get there?"

I went on to explain that Lucy and I would be driving, making an epic road trip out of it. So I would need her to come down and stay with Dad for a month.

"Come on, Brenda, please do this for me. Dad can't stay by himself. Those widow women will *not* leave him alone."

"Let me talk it over with my hubby and call you back. But I am sure it will be fine. This is a big opportunity for you, and I don't want you to miss it. Besides, you take care of Dad all the time. It's the least I can do."

"Thanks, sis, I really appreciate it."

We ended the call with her promising to call me as soon as she confirmed her plans with her husband. Next, I had to convince Lucy. The call with Lucy went easier than I had anticipated. She put up some resistance at first, but then she relented. She knew this was a good opportunity for both of us. One day, I would like to hand my business over and just write full-time. Once Lucy cleared things with her hubby, Daddy Joe to me, we were set.

We spent an hour on the phone, making arrangements and plotting the course to California. In two weeks' time, I would head to Florida to pick her up and our cross-country journey would begin. Maddie confirmed Lucy and me as signing authors and booked our hotel stay for the event.

I spoke in great length to my right-hand man Jimmy, about handling the billing company until I returned. He'd been with me for years and knew what he was doing. I wouldn't trust just anyone with my business. Besides, I'd be just a phone call away if he needed me.

It took me a while to pack not only my clothes, but my books, banners and swag. My book suitcase was larger than the one for my clothes. Lucy and I spent several hours on the phone coordinating our outfits and deciding on the number of items we would be taking. As the big day approached, I got more excited.

I hadn't had a vacation in a while, so this was going to be great. I made sure I had my camera along with a cooler and bags of snacks for the road. Dad insisted on helping me load the car and made sure he checked the oil and fluids in it. My sister was due to arrive later tonight, and I am leaving early tomorrow.

I slammed the snooze on my alarm when it went off the next morning. Who in their right mind gets up at five am anyway? Another thing you should know about me is that I do not speak until I have had my caffeine fix. I took a quick shower and dressed in leggings and a long gray t-shirt. I put on a little make-up and slammed down an energy drink.

My sister was already up, drinking coffee on my balcony. She was definitely a morning person. I said a quiet goodbye to her and left my condo. To my shock, I literally ran into hot neighbor. He was dressed in a pair of running shorts and no shirt. His wide chest was glistening. Instinctively, I reached in my purse for my duct tape but at the last minute stopped. I reminded myself he was with someone else and didn't want to have anything to do with me.

I smiled politely and turned to head to my SUV.

"Going somewhere?" he asked me in his deep, baritone voice.

"Yes. I was asked to sign at a book event in California."

"Wow! That's fantastic. Congratulations."

A part of me was taken aback by his enthusiasm until I realized he was probably just happy I would be gone and out of his hair for a while.

"Thank you. My sister is staying at my house with my dad."

"Have a great trip," hot neighbor said.

With that, I smiled and hurried to my SUV before I did something stupid—like tie him up and throw him in the back seat. Knowing my luck, I would get arrested before I crossed the state line. I knew I would not do well in prison.

After a quick trip through the drive through to get some breakfast, I jumped on the interstate.

The trip to Lucy's went well, except for some road construction and an extra bathroom stop that made me a little late. When I pulled up in front of her house, she was pacing back and forth with that cancer stick in her mouth.

"When you gonna quit that nasty habit?" I asked Lucy, stepping out of my SUV.

"When people quit stressing me out," she retorted, grounding that nasty cig out.

"What? I had to stop and use the restroom. I'm here now. Let me go in and say hi to Daddy Joe and we'll get on our way."

I followed Lucy inside and chatted with Daddy Joe for a few minutes while we loaded her stuff into my SUV. After the third trip, I asked her, "Think you brought enough?"

"You know me," Lucy shot back with a laugh.

I gave Daddy Joe a hug and gave them some privacy to say their goodbyes. I give Lucy a hard time, but she's been through a lot in her life and it's great to see her so happy. The two of them were made for each other. I secretly longed for that kind of relationship. One day, it will happen—I hope.

We filled up the SUV with gas and grabbed a quick bite to eat before we hopped on I-10. We decided to drive as long as we could then find somewhere to spend the night. As I drove and Lucy navigated, we caught up on the latest news. I told her about my run in with hot neighbor before I busted out my playlist and sang to her. I am pretty sure she appreciated my rendition of *Let It Go*.

When we couldn't stand it any longer, Lucy found a Holiday Inn for us to stay the night. They had a nice room with two queen beds. It was perfect for the night. We were so tired, we decided to go to bed. I called to check in on Dad, my sister and the fur babies, then we watched *Golden Girls* until we fell asleep.

The next morning, I was showered and ready to go while Lucy was still in bed. A long time ago, she was given the nickname *the Diva* by me. It was a title she lived up to. She was used to Daddy Joe waiting on her hand and foot. But not this trip.

"I'm going down to breakfast. You need to be ready when I get back, chick. I'll bring you some fruit and a cinnamon roll."

Lucy saluted me and said, "Yes, Captain."

When I returned to the room, Lucy was ready to go. We stopped off at a gas station to fuel up and I grabbed a Five Hour Energy for the road. The trip was going well, and we agreed to stop at a local restaurant in Lake Charles, Louisiana for lunch. The food was great, and an hour later we were back on the road. I was singing along to Kelly Clarkson when Lucy asked me if I noticed a vehicle in my rearview mirror.

I gasped aloud.

"What?" Lucy asked.

"If I didn't know it was impossible, I'd say that looks like hot neighbor's car."

"Wishful thinking," she teased. "Just keep an eye out for it. It's been staying behind us ever since we got back on the road after lunch."

Great! A stalker on the road. Just what The Double L's needed in their lives.

Chapter Three

Lucy

SO NOW, WE'VE GOT THIS CAR THAT SEEMS TO BE FOLLOWING US. Linda jokingly said it looks like hot neighbor's car, but I still think we need to be cautious. It's highly unlikely that he is following us. I mean, think about it. Linda's been chasing him since the day he moved in next door to her. He's never shown any interest, and she just told me the other day that he's seeing someone now. So why would he be following us on our road trip? Unless... oh, heck, no. That's a crazy thought. Isn't it?

I turned my attention back to the road. We were making good time and soon, it would be time to start looking for a place to bed down for the night. We decided to call Joe and see what he was up to today. I had talked to him while Linda went to get breakfast this morning, but she enjoys giving him a hard time, so we put him on speaker.

"Hello, babe, where are you?" he said when he saw who was calling on his Caller ID.

"We're in Louisiana, thinking about calling it a day pretty soon. What are you up to?" I replied.

"Just binge-watching Lucifer, on Netflix. I'm going to order pizza in a little bit."

"Hey, Daddy Joe," Linda piped up.

"Hello, Linda. Is Lucy behaving so far?" he teased.

"Eh, she's not doing too bad. So far." Linda laughed.

We talked to him a little longer, then I had a call from Allie, my granddaughter in college, so we said goodbye so I could talk to her.

"Hey, Allie, what's up?" I asked.

"Nothing, just on my way to work and thought I'd call to say hi. Are you guys on the road?" I loved my calls from my sweet girl.

"Yes, we're in Louisiana. Gonna stop soon for the night," I said.

"Well, you girls be careful. That's a long trip," Allie cautioned.

"Yeah, that's why we're trying to stop fairly early each night."

Linda said, "Hey, Allie."

"Hi, Linda. Take good care of my nana. I gotta go. I just pulled into work. I'll check on you girls tomorrow."

"Have fun at work," we both said before we hung up.

Next, Linda calls a friend of hers and we talked for a while, then it was really time to get serious about a hotel for the night.

"There's a Hampton at the next exit," she said. "Is that okay with you?"

"Yeah, I probably have some points we can use there," I said, getting online on my phone to see if I really did have any. "Free room tonight. Jackpot!" I said.

"All right! I'm ready to stop. I'm starving and tired," Linda said.

We got checked in and to our room. We decided to order a pizza instead of going out for dinner. So, we got into comfy clothes for the night and waited for our food before picking out a movie to watch. It felt good to relax after a long day on the road.

I looked at Linda and said, "I sure hope we lost our tailgater."

"Unless it was hot neighbor," she teased.

I rolled my eyes as she got up to answer the door. She tipped the pizza guy and we settled in to enjoy our meal.

"I saw a guy going in the room across the hall," she said. "He sure looked like—"

"Linda, stop! You know it wasn't him," I said as I took a sip of my Coke.

But what if she was right? Could it be him? Why? Was he planning to follow us all the way across the country? This was crazy.

"Okay, okay," Linda said. "Let's map out our day tomorrow before we watch the movie."

I grabbed my phone and pulled up a Texas map. "I think we should at least make it to El Paso tomorrow. What do you think?"

She was looking at her own phone. "Yeah, sounds good to me. Now, let's forget about the trip and watch the movie."

We put the remnants of our dinner in the trash and settled in to watch *After We Collided*.

When the movie was over, we turned the TV to our all-time favorite *Golden Girls* and laughed at the antics of Blanche, Rose, Dorothy and Sophia until we fell asleep.

The next morning, I surprised Linda by getting up early and going to breakfast with her. I wanted to see for myself if the mysterious guy from across the hall was around.

After we'd gotten our food and found a table, I took a sip of coffee and looked around. "Do you see hot neighbor anywhere?" I asked.

"I don't see any good-looking dudes, and the guy across from us is hiding behind a newspaper. Think I could nonchalantly walk over there and get a look at his face?" she asked.

"I don't think so!" I said. I wouldn't put it past Linda to do just that!

We finished eating, and I grabbed a cup of coffee for the road before we went upstairs to grab our stuff and hit the road again. We had miles to travel! El Paso by sundown.

As we made our way across Texas on I-10, we stopped a few times to take photos. I was having a blast, and I'm sure Linda was too. We called our friend Donna and talked to her for a while. Donna always expected a call from the Double L's when we were on a road trip. After that, we decided to break for lunch and found a Cracker Barrel.

We'd been having so much fun, I had forgotten to look behind us to see if we were still being followed. I asked Linda if she'd noticed.

"Nope, not today. I guess it really was wishful thinking on my part," she said as we got out of the SUV and walked into the restaurant.

"It would have really been cool if had been hot neighbor, though," I answered, almost wishing it had been him.

I looked around the gift shop until they called our name for a table. We enjoyed our lunch but didn't waste time as we still had some miles to cover. Soon, we were back in the car and Linda was singing... again.

Suddenly, she stopped and said, "Oh my God!"

"What?" I asked. She'd scared me half to death. Were we about to get rear-ended, or what?

"It's that car again. I swear it's just like his!"

I turned to look, and sure enough, our road buddy was back. The driver was wearing shades, so I couldn't get a good look at his face.

"What the..." she said. "I don't get it. Why is that car following us?"

"Maybe they aren't. They could just be going someplace on this route. We'll lose them once they get to where they're going, I'm sure." I tried to convince myself as much as Linda.

"I guess. It's still just weird. Let's stop up ahead to fill up with gas and take a break. We'll see if they get off the exit

too."

"Okay," I answered. I almost hoped they kept going, even though I was curious.

Linda put gas in the car once we'd found a station. Then she pulled the SUV away from the pumps and into a spot in front of the store. We both got out and went inside. No sign of our supposed follower, so I must have been right.

When I came out of the restroom, Linda was flirting with a guy in line at the counter. I rolled my eyes, got myself a cup of coffee and a candy bar, and went to the checkout line.

Settled into the vehicle again, we hit the road, refreshed from our brief stop.

"Well, I'll be," Linda said.

"What, now?"

"Look who's behind us again."

"How in the world? Unless they stopped at another station at that exit. This is getting curiouser and curiouser." I laughed and took a sip of my coffee.

"No, I would have seen them getting off the exit. They had to have stopped at the next one," Linda reasoned.

"Yeah, true," I said. By now, I was totally baffled. "Let's talk about something else, to get our minds off that mystery car."

"Okay," she said. "Daddy Joe had any kitchen disasters lately?"

"Funny you should ask," I said. Now, Joe is actually a great cook, but he's been known to have some funny things happen. "Did I tell you about the bowl he blew up?"

"What? No, how did he do that?"

"Well, I had bought a box of Velveeta shells and cheese. My mouth was just watering for it one night. I was busy editing, so he offered to make supper. He fried burgers, opened a can of veggies and made the shells and cheese in the microwave. When he called to me come and eat, I heard the sound of glass breaking. I thought he had just dropped

a glass. He started cussing, and you know, Joe doesn't like cussing." I get in trouble for that quite a lot.

"Yeah, so what happened? It had to be bad if Daddy Joe was cussin'."

"Oh, it was. I guess he had set the bowl of shells and cheese on our glass stovetop, and it was hot because of the other food he was cooking. You know, the whole stovetop gets hot on a smooth top glass."

"Yeah."

"Anyway, the bowl shattered. Glass and shells and cheese *everywhere!* Needless to say, I didn't get my shells and cheese that night. He was cussing and cleaning. I finally told him to leave it be and eat, and I'd clean it up."

"Oh, poor Daddy Joe," Linda said. She was cracking up at this point.

It did take our minds off our follower for a while. When we got to El Paso, we found a place to stay. After we checked in, we decided to walk next door to eat at a Tex-Mex restaurant.

"Look! There he is!" Linda was pointing to a car in the parking lot. Sure enough, it looked like our mystery road buddy.

"All a coincidence, keep telling ourselves that," I said as we continued walking.

When we walked back to our rooms after dinner, we hurried. It was dark, and with the threat of our "stalker" possibly being near, we didn't want to take any chances. Once inside, I locked and bolted the door. We hadn't seen anyone suspicious-looking, or hot neighbor, so the mystery hadn't yet been solved.

I decided to put it out of my mind and went in to take a hot shower. When I came out, Linda was on the phone with her sister, so I called Joe and talked to him for a while. Then, Allie started texting, so by the time I was finished texting to her, Linda was off the phone. We turned on the "girls" and watched them until we dozed off.

The next day, we were traveling through New Mexico. California was getting closer, and we were both so excited! Neither of us had ever been there, so we were really looking forward to it. We stopped and took more photos. Linda loves to take photos. She even has a fancy camera. Me, I just take pics on my phone.

We took our time, stopping quite a few times. I think, in truth, Linda was testing our tailgater. He didn't seem to be stopping when we did, but somehow, he always managed to end up behind us at some point. One place we stopped that was pretty cool was White Sands, in New Mexico.

We decided to get off the road early that day and take some time to enjoy the state of Arizona, since Linda had never been there. I'd been through once but hadn't really spent a lot of time sightseeing, so it was going to be fun for both of us.

We got settled into a hotel near Phoenix and grabbed some brochures from the rack in the hotel lobby to check out what there was to see in the area. After a few hours of exploring, we took in a popular museum, had a bite to eat and finally went back to our room around eight that night.

"Did you see what was in the parking lot?" Linda asked as we got into our room.

"Yeah, I saw. I think we need to start doing some investigating. The Double L spy service." I was only half joking.

We got ready for bed and started plotting our next move. How were we going to find out who the mysterious driver was? I think our next sideline was born that night. We were going into the investigation business. Who knows, maybe we'd start writing mysteries next!

For the next hour, we brainstormed. A plan in the works, we tried to go to sleep, but we were both too excited. We had some poking around to do, and we would arrive in San Diego tomorrow! Would our mystery driver also be there? And just who was it? Maybe it was another author traveling

to the same event we were. Or better yet, a cover model! One way or the other, we were determined to find out.

We finally fell asleep around midnight. We got a little later start the next morning, but it was fine. We had about six hours of driving to do. *The car* was gone from the parking lot when we loaded up and left. Hmm, maybe there was nothing to check out after all.

But sure enough, after we'd stopped for lunch, guess who was behind us when we got back on the road.

Chapter Four

Linda

"I AM JUST CRAZY; THAT'S IT. THERE IS NO FREAKING WAY HOT neighbor is following us across the US. No way. He doesn't want me. He made that crystal clear when he started dating that hooker—I mean woman," I said to Lucy.

"It sure does look like him, though," Lucy replied.

"Well, I am not thinking about him anymore. We are less than a half hour from the Grand Canyon and I want to see it. So how about a detour?"

"Sounds like a great plan to me."

We drove for a bit until we reached the entrance to the Grand Canyon. I grabbed my camera after I parked the car. I had seen videos and pictures of it before, but they didn't do it justice. The one word I could use to describe it was just magical. The pure sight of it was breathtaking.

"Wow!" was all I managed to say.

"So worth the detour," Lucy said.

I snapped a ton of pictures after that. We stayed for a while and Lucy tried to get me go on the Skybridge but that was a heck no. I don't do heights. We were both exhausted and hungry by the time we made it back to the SUV. There was a restaurant near us that had opened in 1905 and the locals told us we had to try it.

Normally, we chose to eat on a budget with our road trips, however, we both decided to try this fine dining establishment. Since I would be driving, Lucy ordered the local favorite drink, the Grand Canyon vodka made with prickly pear. It was still lunch, so we decided to split the Navajo tacos made for fry bread. For dessert, we split the apple streusel pie.

"All day and no sightings of not neighbor. Wishful thinking, I guess," I said to Lucy as we paid the bill. "I have been pursuing that man since the day he moved in and nothing. It's time to move on. He has."

"One day, you will win your hot neighbor, Linda."

It was getting late by the time we got back on the road, so we decided to only drive a few hours then find somewhere to spend the night. I serenaded Lucy with my rendition of *Let it Go* before she fell asleep in the passenger seat. We were both tired, so I didn't take it personally when she passed out. I decided now would be a good time to check on Dad.

"Hello?"

"Dad?"

"Hey, honey. Where are you?"

"We made a detour and saw the Grand Canyon. It was amazing, Dad!" I exclaimed. Then I told him all about Lucy and our day there and the restaurant where we ate before I asked, "Hey, Dad, have you seen hot neighbor?"

"Well, now that you mention it, I have not seen him. But I did hear music coming from his condo last night and his lights were on."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Well, honey, you be safe. I need to go. Mrs. Faye is picking me up for Bingo."

"Have fun, Dad. I love you."

"Love you too."

I hadn't seen anyone following us since we left the restaurant. I guess my mind was playing tricks on me. Time

to forget about hot neighbor and focus on the book signing. The closer we got to San Diego, the more excited I got. This was a big deal for Lucy and me. When I began to yawn, I looked for a place to pull over for the night. I found a Marriott close to the California border and decided to stop there.

"Lucy, wake up."

"What! Where are we?" Lucy yawned.

"Get yourself together. I'll go get us a room. We are a few hours from San Diego, but I am falling asleep at the wheel. So I stopped."

I left her to get our bags and went to check in. I was able to get us a room with two queen beds. I looked around the lobby and Lucy was nowhere in sight. I will admit I was getting a bit ill. I was tired and ready for a good night's rest. I found her standing by the car smoking one of those things.

"Don't say it," Lucy said before I could open my mouth.

"Here is your room key. It's 332; I am going on up."

"Okay. I will be up in a few after I finish this and call Daddy Joe."

I grabbed my bag and walked to the elevator. I knew I gave her a hard time about her ciga-smack habit, but the truth was she really was making a huge effort to stop. And knowing my friend, when she set her mind to something, she would do it. I only give her a hard time because I care. I put my card in the door and went into our room. The first thing I did was turn the air down. I chose the bed by the bathroom. Due to the amount of water I drink, I tend to get up a few times during the night.

After I washed my makeup off, I dressed in a gray Clemson t-shirt and shorts. I was climbing into my bed when Lucy came barreling through the door.

"You will never guess who I saw in the parking lot. Hot neighbor! He is here!"

"Lucy, you are still drunk—"

"No, I am sure it was him," she said, cutting me off.

"I talked to Dad earlier while you were passed out. He said he heard noise and saw the lights on in hot neighbor's condo. So it couldn't have been him."

"I could have sworn it was him," Lucy said, sitting on the end of her bed. "It looked just like him."

"Listen, Luce, it was wishful thinking on my part. I just want what you and Daddy Joe have."

"One day, that man will wake up and realize what a dumbass he is for not returning your feelings."

"I appreciate that. Now can we just focus on the book conference?"

Lucy agreed and excused herself to get ready for bed. I checked my phone for any messages and posted a few Grand Canyon pictures on Instagram. After I set the alarm on my phone, I plugged it into the charger. I settled under the covers and found a *Golden Girls* marathon on TV.

"I think Joe misses me," Lucy began when she emerged from the bathroom. "I just got off the phone with him and now he's texted me twice already."

I laughed to myself and watched her flurry around the room before settling into her bed. A long time ago, I nicknamed her *the Diva*. We were on our very first trip together and since I was her personal assistant at the time, we stayed in the same room. I was dressed, waiting to go to the event when she ran out of the bathroom in only her bra and pants. She stood right in front of me and said, "Zip my pants."

I simply replied, "I don't think that is in my job description."

She then explained she'd just had her nails done and didn't want to mess them up. That day, the nickname *Diva* was born just for her.

"Linda, did you hear me?"

"Yeah. Sorry, I'm tired."

"What time do we need to leave tomorrow?"

"I think we need to be on the road by eight. According to GPS, we are less than four hours away from San Diego. And check-in is not until three."

"I am getting excited!" Lucy exclaimed.

"I am too. Maddie emailed over all the information we will need to get our badges. She pre-registered us so we won't have to wait in line forever."

"That's great. I wish she could have come too."

"Me too."

Lucy was still talking to me when I drifted off to sleep. I slept soundly but woke up before my alarm went off, so I checked my texts and emails. There was nothing urgent with my business that required my attention. I quietly dressed and headed down for breakfast. Lucy was snoozing so I decided to let her. I found a quiet table in the restaurant downstairs and ordered bacon and fruit. I had brought my laptop and managed to write a couple of chapters too. The waiter came over and I order coffee and an apple fritter to go for Lucy.

My thoughts kept drifting back to hot neighbor. I found myself constantly looking around for him. I even took the long way around the hotel lobby to the elevator in the hopes I might spot him. When I finally made it back to the room, Lucy was up and dressed.

"Brought you breakfast," I said, handing her the bag.

"You must have gotten up early," she said.

"Yeah, I went down and had breakfast and got some words in."

"Oh, this is so good," Lucy said, biting her sweet treat.

"The waiter said they bake them fresh here so I thought you would enjoy it."

I finished packing my bag and looked around the hotel room to make sure I didn't leave anything. We grabbed our stuff and headed to the lobby. I went to check us out while she took our bags to the car. As I was walking to the door, I glanced toward the elevator and saw a tall dark blond head

of hair from behind. By the time I made it over, the doors had closed. Was it hot neighbor? Or was I seeing things? It stopped on the third floor, so I jumped on the next one and got off there. I looked down each hallway and saw nothing. *That's it! I have totally lost my mind.*

I was shaking my head when I walked out to the car. Lucy was standing there waiting on me. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"I think I just saw hot neighbor getting on the elevator."

"I told you I saw him last night."

"Get this; it stopped on our floor," I told her. "It can't be him, and we need to get on the road."

We got in the SUV, and I drove around the parking lot looking for his car before heading to the interstate. I didn't see anything.

"Lucy, I think I want to see him so bad, my mind is playing tricks on me."

"I don't know, Linda. I saw him too."

I jumped on I-40 and we drove for a while, just listening to the radio. Lucy was answering emails and I was lost in thought. A big part of me wished it were him. I kept hoping for the happily-ever-after like the books I write.

"Hey, we are about an hour away. Why don't we stop and get lunch?" Lucy asked.

"That sounds like a good plan."

We decided on a Mexican restaurant right off the interstate. We both ordered chicken quesadillas and rice with beans.

"You know, Lucy, I really wish it was hot neighbor."

"I know you do. I'll tell you what. Let's put him out of our minds and enjoy this book signing. I will even help you find some hot model to duct tape."

"That I can do."

Chapter Five

Lucy

I FEEL BAD FOR LINDA. I MEAN, SHE'S BEEN TRYING TO GET HOT neighbor's attention for so long. It's uncanny that we've both seen a car like his several times on this trip, not to mention glimpses of someone who looks like him at various stops along the way. But she said it's not possible that it's him because her dad told her that someone has been home in his condo. Could it be possible that someone isn't him? Maybe he let someone stay there. All I know is it's really weird.

Yesterday, we went to the Grand Canyon, and it was awesome. So much beauty there. Today, we should get to our destination. In fact, we're almost there, so I suggested we stop for a bite to eat. Now, we're sitting in a Mexican restaurant, relaxing a bit before Linda drives the last hour to the hotel. Even though I've offered to help with the driving a few times, she hasn't let me. We have decided to concentrate on the book signing and forget about hot neighbor.

Linda is well known for her duct tape. In fact, it's sort of her brand. At every signing we attend, she duct tapes a male subject. It could be the husband of a reader or a hot male model. Either way, it's fun and everyone gets a big

kick out of it. I think she ought to just use that duct tape on hot neighbor, but she doesn't agree.

My cell rang. It was my daughter, calling to see if we'd made it to California yet. I put her on speaker, and we talked a bit, then I had to go because my bonus daughter was beeping in. She also wanted to know how the trip was going. I swear these kids plan it, because every time one calls or texts, it seems another one does. But I love it and am grateful they keep in touch almost every day.

After talking to both of my girls, I resumed eating my lunch. Linda was talking to her sister, and then my son texted me. Finally, we finished and got back in the car. I looked around the parking lot to see if I spotted that familiar car again. I didn't let on to Linda what I was doing so when I didn't see it, I didn't say anything.

Joe called while we were driving, so we talked to him until we got to the hotel. He said he missed me. I knew he would. You'd think he'd like the alone time, and he does to a certain extent, but this is a long trip.

We got checked into our room and it was gorgeous, with a view of the water. After getting settled and freshened up, we decided to do some exploring. We ran into a few authors we knew and joined them for a drink. Linda doesn't usually drink, so she had a soda, but the rest of us threw caution to the wind and ordered mixed drinks.

We chatted and got caught up with our friends, and then we decided to order dinner and look over our schedules for the event.

After dinner, Linda and I went back to our rooms for the night. We were ready to get into our pjs and relax with the TV. As we were getting on the elevator, Linda grabbed my arm.

"Don't look now, but I see a guy who looks like him," she said.

"Not again?" I said. I sneaked a peek, and sure enough, I could have sworn it was hot neighbor. I couldn't believe it.

This was just getting spooky.

We got to our room, neither of us knowing what to think about what we'd just seen. Could it be? Could he have followed us here?

"Did you tell him where we were staying?" I asked as I kicked off my shoes and sank down on my bed.

"I don't think so. I told him I was coming out here for a book signing, but I don't remember telling him anything else," Linda replied as she too climbed onto her bed.

"Well, he would have had to ask someone. Your dad, your sister?" I prodded.

"Dad would have said if he'd asked him. You know he can't keep a secret."

"Well, what about your sister? You should call her. You didn't mention any of this to her earlier?"

"No, didn't think about it. She thinks I'm nuts when I talk about him, so I never say much around her about him."

"Wanna go back out and see if we can spot him again?" I asked.

"Nah, I'm ready to chill for the night. If he's here, we'll surely see him again. And if he did, for some strange reason, follow us out here, he'll make himself known eventually, won't he? I mean, why drive all the way out here and not tell us he's here?"

"How could he get off work on a moment's notice?" I asked.

"He works for himself, so he could have brought work with him," she explained.

"What does he do?" I asked. I don't remember if she'd ever told me.

"He's a photographer, so he travels around and takes photos and sells them to magazines and brochures."

"So, he could be on assignment?"

"I suppose it could be possible, but a little too much of a coincidence, don't you think?" Linda pointed out.

"I guess so, but stranger things have happened. Does he usually fly or drive?"

"I don't really know. I guess either, depending on his budget, time, destination and all that."

"Maybe he decided to take a vacation. He could always snap photos while traveling the countryside."

"I don't want to think about it anymore. We have a busy day tomorrow, so let's just find a movie and settle in. I'm going to change my clothes and wash off my makeup."

"I'm going out to smoke, then I'll get ready too. You can pick out the movie. You want a bottle of water or a soda while I'm out?"

"I still have water in the cooler I brought. I'll put some in the fridge. Hurry back."

"Okay, but I'm going to scout around a bit, so it might not be right away," I told her.

Linda sighed and shook her head. I wasn't fooling her. She knew exactly what my plan was. I was going to look for hot neighbor.

I went down to the lobby but didn't see anyone who looked like him. Then I went to the smoking area. While I was there, I watched the people milling around. Still nothing. I went back inside and stopped in one of the gift shops and browsed around before heading back up to our room.

Linda was in bed all snuggled under the covers, flipping the remote. I hurried into the bathroom to get ready for bed and was soon in my bed too, after grabbing a bottle of water.

We settled on a movie and began watching. Linda didn't ask if I'd seen anything or anyone and I didn't comment, either. She'd said she didn't want to think about it, so I wasn't about to bring it up.

The next morning, we got up early. We'd set our alarms for seven. After our showers, we got ready and went down to breakfast before heading to our first workshop of the day.

We saw a few other authors we knew and sat with them. It was always fun to run into people we knew at these events.

"Did Joe come with you?" one of the authors asked.

"No, I left him home this time. We decided to do a cross-country girls' trip, and we're having a blast," I told her. Linda laughed.

All of my author friends really like Joe. He's got a great sense of humor and likes to tease them.

After the workshop was over, we all went to another one and then decided to check out some of the restaurants in the hotel for lunch.

We chose an Italian place and were joined by a few other authors we'd met at the second workshop, so we had a pretty nice-sized group around the table. We had fun, talking about books and also some of the things around San Diego we wanted to see before we left. This was a once in a lifetime trip for Linda and me, so we didn't want to miss a thing if we could help it.

The food was great, but all too soon, it was time for the afternoon workshops to start. Linda and I decided to take in one more and then go out to do some exploring for the rest of the afternoon.

We picked up some brochures in the lobby before going back to our room when the workshop ended. We had done laundry in one of the hotels along the way, so we had plenty of clean clothes to pick from. We dropped off our workshop materials and changed into casual clothes before grabbing her camera and the brochures and taking off to get the SUV. After leafing through the brochures, we decided to go to one of the beaches first.

The Pacific was gorgeous in the late afternoon. Linda got several good shots and I walked in the sand, enjoying the sunshine. I looked up and saw a tall, blond-haired man ahead of me. Could it be? I turned to where Linda was standing and saw that she also had seen him. She was

taking photos. Good idea. Maybe we could decide from those if the man was who we thought he was.

Next, we decided to check out some of the shops so we could pick up some souvenirs. She wanted to buy for her family, and I had kids and grandkids to shop for.

After that, we found a quaint little restaurant near the beach and decided to try some of the local fare for dinner before going back to the hotel. There were some fun activities planned for the evening and if we got back in time to freshen up, we thought we might stop in for a few minutes before going in for the night.

I had found a few things for the granddaughters and daughters, but I still had more shopping to do for the boys, so we'd be going out again, I was sure. Linda had found things for her sister and her nieces but nothing for her dad and nephews. The food turned out to be fantastic, but we were going to have to hurry if we wanted to make an appearance at the party that night.

When we got back to the hotel, we took turns in the bathroom and hurriedly made ourselves presentable before going downstairs. We'd decided not to stay long because we were anxious to get back to the room and download all of the photos Linda had taken earlier.

The party was in full swing when we arrived. We mingled for a while and then quietly left to go back to our room.

"Did you see that guy who was taking pictures?" I asked Linda when we got on the elevator.

"The one in the funny hat. Yeah, why?"

"Think it's possible that hot neighbor could be doing the photos for this event, by chance?" I asked. "I mean, anything's possible, right?"

"I don't know why he would be or why he wouldn't have mentioned it when I told him I was coming out here, but I guess it's possible," Linda agreed.

"We'll have to pay close attention to the photographer in the next few days," I suggested.

Linda just shook her head and we got off on our floor.

As usual, we got ready for bed and vegged in front of the TV until we fell asleep. But not before Linda decided to order chocolate cake from room service. That was another thing we did on our trips sometimes. Diets went out the window when we went to events. It was our time to live it up. We looked through the photos she'd downloaded while we ate, but we still couldn't make out the face of the guy we'd seen on the beach.

The cake really hit the spot as we'd skipped dessert at dinner to rush back. We watched another movie, then it really was time for bed. We were going to skip the morning workshops and sleep in a little before finding some more shops. We'd be back in time for lunch and the afternoon events.

The next day, we found the rest of the things we needed to purchase and got back in time for a quick bite before heading off to the workshops and fun things that were planned. That night, we had made plans for dinner with our author friends, so we had that to look forward to.

We didn't run into the mysterious photographer nor did we see the guy who looked like hot neighbor.

Dinner was fun as usual. We laughed and talked, ate and drank. We stayed in the restaurant for several hours before calling it a night.

In our room, we got everything ready for the book signing the next day. It was pretty much an all-day event, so we had to get up early and get ready so we could set up our tables. After that, we'd go to breakfast, get back in time for the group photos, and then situate ourselves at our tables to greet the readers for several hours. Linda and I loved book signings. It was so much fun to chat with readers.

It didn't dawn on either of us that the photographer who would be taking the photos before and after the signing could be hot neighbor. One way or the other, the mystery could be solved tomorrow.

We laid out our clothes for the next day after making sure our books and swag were ready. Then we settled into bed. We watched *The Golden Girls*, of course, until we both fell asleep, excited about the next day.

The next morning after setting up our tables, we headed out for a quick bite to eat. I was in dire need of coffee, so we found a coffee shop and decided to eat there.

"So I wonder who you'll be duct taping at this signing," I commented as I took that first heavenly sip of java.

Linda laughed. "You never know. Maybe the photographer."

I almost spit my coffee out at that remark. "That's right; we'll get to see his face today. He won't be wearing the crazy hat that hid his hair. Well, hopefully not."

"Yep, today's the day. At least we'll know whether or not the photographer is hot neighbor," Linda said as she picked up a slice of bacon.

It was soon time to head back to the room where the signing was to take place to get our instructions for the group photos. The time was drawing near, and I didn't know about Linda, but the suspense was nearly killing me.

I touched her hand reassuringly and smiled at her as we entered the room with the other authors. The event coordinators were about to make an announcement, so we gathered around to listen. They were about to tell us where the photos were going to be taken. And soon, very soon, we would see the photographer.

Chapter Six

Linda

A RUSH OF DISAPPOINTMENT CAME OVER ME WHEN THE BOOK EVENT hosts announced that group photos would be taken after the book signing. Normally, at past signings, group photos were taken before. That meant I would have to wait to see if the photographer was hot neighbor. I think I must be going crazy. He would not give me the time of day, so why would he be here? And on the off chance he was here, it was due to a job, not me. I looked at Lucy and shook my head.

"I will not let that ruin this day. Let's go to our table. I have hot guys to duct tape."

"Yes, you do." Lucy laughed.

This book event was so large, the author signing took up the two biggest ballrooms. The hosts had done a phenomenal job of organizing the entire event. Lucy and I shared a table, and while my side was decorated with shades of aqua and hot pink, hers was done in reds and blacks. While I went bolder, her side was more elegant. Once we were satisfied with the set-up, I made a quick trip to the ladies' room.

After I did my business and washed my hands, I checked myself in the mirror. *Not too shabby*. I cleaned up nice. Once I applied a bit more lipstick, I made a quick call to

check on Dad then headed back to the event room. I made my way over to our table and Lucy was not there. She must have headed out for a quick smoke. We had time before the doors opened, so I grabbed my camera and began snapping pictures of the other authors.

I stopped and chatted with a few of them as well. By the time I made my way back over to our table, Lucy was there. I took a few pictures of her and our table before I put my camera away.

"Where did you go?" I asked her.

"I just went for a quick smoke," she replied.

Funny, she didn't smell like smoke. Before I had time to press her further, the doors opened, and the VIP members rushed in. We spent the next two hours signing books, catching up with old readers and meeting new ones. I loved this so much, actually meeting people who love the words I put on paper. There was no better feeling. In each book I write, there is a piece of myself in it, so the fact that people loved my work still amazed me.

I'd been so busy, I hadn't thought about hot neighbor at all. That is until I spotted a tall man with a backwards baseball cap on his head, taking pictures. It was the same man from before. It had to be. He had his back to me, so I couldn't see his face. I tried to get Lucy's attention, but she had several people surrounding her. By the time I could step away from my table, he was gone. Ugh. I had to stop doing this. Lucy gave me a sympathetic look as I sat down.

"I couldn't get a look at his face."

"Sorry, Linda. Hey, come on. We have a thirty minute break before the doors open back up. Let's go get some air."

The VIP ticket holders get to come to the signing early, for two hours before the general admission crowd comes in. They give the authors a break in between to use the restroom and grab some food. Normally, it's hard to get away from your table once the event starts. I know, for me, I

hate to leave my table because I don't want to miss meeting anyone. These book signings really do make a person feel like a rock star.

I remember my first one. Someone put a book in front of me and I just looked at them.

Lucy leaned over and whispered, "Sign it."

I looked at her and just laughed. I couldn't imagine anyone wanting my autograph. She still gives me a hard time about that one.

We grabbed a turkey sandwich and a banana and sat outside on the patio overlooking the ocean. I took a deep breath and soaked in the salty smell of the water.

"I think the signing is going well, don't you?" Lucy asked me.

"Yes! I am so glad we came."

"Listen, Linda, you will meet a man one day who will sweep you off your feet. Like Joe did for me."

"That means a lot to me, Linda. I just have to get that hot neighbor out of my mind," I replied, smiling.

"You do. Tell you what, let's focus on the rest of the book signing and finding a hot guy to duct tape."

"Sounds like a great plan to me. We'd better get back."

We disposed of our trash and made a quick trip to the ladies' room before heading back to our table. Over the next few hours, I barely had time to think. The readers poured in, and Lucy and I nearly sold out of all of our books. A hot couple came in, and the husband looked nervous. I picked up my hot pink duct tape and twirled it around my finger. His eyes widened and I winked at his wife. She nodded her head and that was my signal.

"Well, sir, I hear you've been a little naughty and you need to be taught a lesson."

With his wife's help, he held his hands out and I wrapped them in my hot pink duct tape. People gathered around the table while Lucy snapped pictures. His wife was loving it. Let me just say this guy was hot. He had on a sleeveless t-

shirt and his biceps were bulging. I have to say he was such a good sport, posing for pictures, and I even got him to smile. After agreeing to send him and his wife copies of the pictures, I let him go.

"And the tradition continues," Lucy said, laughing.

"He was such a good sport, and wow, his wife is lucky."

We signed a few more books, and the event was soon coming to a close. After the readers left, we began packing up what was left. Since we'd both sold nearly all of our books and had given away all of our swag, it didn't take us long.

"Time for pictures," I said to Lucy nervously.

"I guess we will find out, one way or the other," she replied.

I didn't hold much hope it would be hot neighbor, but a part of me still wished it would turn out to be him. I touched up my lipstick as all the signing authors gathered for the group photos. I stood near the back and pushed Lucy out in front of me, since she was shorter. My heart began to beat faster when the photographer entered the room. I lost my breath when he turned around and it was *him*!

"Hot neighbor!" I yelled to Lucy.

"Oh my gosh! It is really him!"

He was so freaking sexy. His tight jeans hugged his butt in all the right places. The green t-shirt matched the deep green of his eyes. Part of me wanted to run up and duct tape him and take him to my room. The other part couldn't believe he was really here. Had he followed us across the country, or did he only come for the job and this was some big coincidence? I tried to make eye contact with him, but he managed to avoid it. I guess I had my answer. He hadn't come for me.

By the time the photographs were done, and I made my way through the crowd of authors, he was gone.

"It was him!" Lucy came up behind me.

"Yeah. But it was clear he didn't come for me. And now he's gone."

"I'm sorry, Linda."

"Wishful thinking on my part, Lucy. I am going to head up to the room and rest a bit."

"I will see you in a few minutes, Linda."

Lucy gave me a quick hug and I headed to the elevator with my book suitcase in tow. I couldn't remember a time when I had felt so disappointed. My past love life hadn't been the greatest, so I shouldn't be that surprised, I guess. One boyfriend left me for my best friend and my ex-fiancé cheated on me and got another woman pregnant. I thought hot neighbor was different. I'd been watching him for a long time. He seemed liked the real deal.

Once I was back in the room, I put on my sweats and lay across my bed. I put the SD card in my laptop and began looking at the pictures I'd taken during the book signing. I posted a few on social media then decided a nap was in order. The closing party was in a few hours, and I didn't want to miss it. Hopefully, the rest would snap me out of my self-pity mood. I sent a quick text to Lucy to let her know and I dozed off.



BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! MY ALARM BLARED ON MY PHONE.

"Turn that noise off." I heard Lucy from the other side of the room.

Apparently, she'd had the same idea, because she was in her bed with a pillow over her head.

"That was a good nap," I said as I crawled out of bed. "I am going to take a quick shower and get dressed."

It didn't take me long to get dressed since I didn't have to wash my hair again. I put the finishing touches on my make-up and left the bathroom. Lucy was next. While I

waited on her, I called my sister and checked on Dad. I told them about the signing but left out the part about hot neighbor. Tonight, I was going to have fun and not focus on my secret heartbreak.

Lucy came out of the bathroom wearing a white shirt.

"Really? They are serving pasta tonight and you are wearing a white shirt."

She rolled her eyes at me and grabbed another shirt. You see, white shirts were not safe around Lucy. Every single time she wore one, she spilled food down the front of it. One time on a trip to NOLA, she took a bite of a burger and ketchup splattered all down the front of her white shirt. What did Lucy do? She whipped that shirt over her head and put on one of my duct tape t-shirts right in the middle of traffic, where everyone could see her business.

She changed into a safer black shirt and we headed to the party.

"I am so glad we came to this event. I sold so many books and met so many wonderful people," Lucy said, pushing the button for the elevator.

"I know. We should come again next year. Maybe you could bring Daddy Joe. I am sure he would love it here."

"Linda, I am really sorry about hot neighbor."

"I guess I am not what he was looking for. But I am putting that out of my mind tonight. I am going to have fun."

They had transformed the ballroom into a Vegas casino. There were roulette wheels and card tables through the center of the room, while slot machines lined the walls. A bar was set up at the back of the room. Tables and chairs, decorated in red and black, surrounded the dance floor. There was even a small wedding chapel with an Elvis impersonator. The place was amazing. I knew right away, Lucy would be in her element. She and Daddy Joe liked to gamble from time to time.

Lucy headed to the slot machines and I mingled around the room. I played a few hands of blackjack before making my way to the bar. I didn't really drink, but tonight I indulged in a Casino Royal cocktail. I took a seat at one of the tables overlooking the dance floor and watched as some of the couples danced. One of my favorite slow songs came on and I began swaying in my seat. I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"May I have this dance?" a deep voice asked.

I nearly fell out of my chair. It was hot neighbor! He was standing there, holding out his sexy hand, asking me to dance. My mouth was so dry, I couldn't form a sentence, so like a dork, I nodded my head yes. When he linked our hands, my knees went weak and electricity shot through my body. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and he began moving us around the floor. He pulled me closer and I rested my head on his chest. He was a foot taller than I was, so I fit perfectly. It was like that spot was made for me. In that moment, the entire room disappeared. It was just me and hot neighbor.

I had so many questions I wanted to ask, but I didn't want to ruin this one perfect dance. He smelled so good and felt so right. He pulled away when the song ended, and my heart dropped, until he said, "Come with me."

I followed him through a back entrance to a quiet terrace overlooking the ocean.

"I guess I owe you an explanation," he began. "You are going to think I am some creepy stalker, but when I heard you were coming to this event, I knew I had to come. It was luck or fate that their photographer bailed, and I got the job. You see, I have been trying to get up the nerve to ask you out for so long, but I always chickened out. It was too late to book a flight, so I just drove here."

"You wanted to ask me out?"

"Yes. I really like you, Linda."

"I like you too, hot neighbor."

"Luke. You know my name is Luke, right?"

"Of course, Luke," I said, blushing.

He leaned down and kissed me until my toes curled.

"How do you feel about duct tape?" I asked.

Epilogue

Lucy

I LOOK BACK ON THAT NIGHT NOW AND SMILE. IT'S BEEN SIX months, but that trip will always be one of my favorite memories with Linda, and I have many.

Let's go back to what happened that night and the days that followed. The party was almost over. I'd won a little money at the slots and went to look for Linda so we could walk back to our room together. I couldn't find her anywhere. I was really starting to panic until I walked outside. When I got close to the terrace, imagine my surprise when I saw Linda in the arms of none other than hot neighbor. How and when had that happened? What had I missed? Was I seeing things? I asked myself these questions as I decided to leave them alone and go on back up to our room alone.

I went back inside and said goodbye to some of our friends, promising to see them the next day before we headed out. We had a long drive ahead of us. I'd had a blast, but I was ready to get home to see my sweetie. I went to our room and got comfy then called Joe to fill him in. I told him I'd call back when I had the details.

I was beginning to get worried when Linda didn't come to the room after an hour. I was just getting ready to go

down to look for her when she breezed into the room, practically floating on air.

"Where have you been? I was getting worried about you!" I said in my best motherly tone. I wasn't going to tell her I'd seen her locked in an embrace with hot neighbor. I was waiting for her to spill the beans all on her own. After all, this was the moment she'd been waiting on for years. I wasn't about to spoil it for her.

"Oh, Lucy, you are never going to believe what happened!" she exclaimed as she plopped down on her bed, grinning from ear to ear.

I folded my arms across my chest, and in the sternest tone I could muster without bursting into giggles, I said, "I'm waiting, missy."

It didn't faze her at all. Nothing was going to burst her bubble that night. She had a dreamy-ass look on her face as she started talking. "I was just sitting there at a table, you know, taking a break. A slow song came on, and as usual, I was watching other couples dance. Then, lo and behold, someone asked me to dance. I looked up and it was *him*! It was hot neighbor, in the flesh, holding his hand out to me and asking me to freakin' dance with him."

I tried to sound surprised. "Really? Then what happened? Were you just dying in that moment?"

She grinned. This girl was really gone. I'm telling you, she was in Heaven. "Of course, I said yes. We danced and oh, it was so sexy. He smelled so good. He held me close and I laid my head on his chest, because you know he's so flippin' tall."

"Okay, the party was ending, and I couldn't find you, so I came on up to the room. Have you been with him all this time? I hope that's the case instead of you looking for me. I didn't know what else to do so I came up to wait for you. But I was just getting ready to go looking for you again when you came in. Couldn't you have texted me or something to let me know you hadn't been kidnapped?" I

was still trying my best to give her a hard time. I was determined to hear all the dirt she had to tell me, and this was the best way I knew to get it out of her. If she could get that silly grin off her face long enough to come down to Earth and tell me, that is. I was having a really hard time keeping a straight face.

She looked at me as if I had two heads. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't even think about it. Surely, you understand that this was the best night of my life, the night I've been dreaming about for years."

"Yes, I do. Now go on. Tell me the rest."

"Well, we walked outside to the terrace. You know, the one facing the ocean. It was so romantic. Hot neighbor, I mean Luke, told me that when he heard I was coming out here, he knew he had to come too. He got the information from my Facebook page about the event and made some calls. It was a lucky coincidence that the photographer who was booked to do the event had to cancel at the last minute and they were scrambling to find someone."

"Sounds like fate to me," I commented.

"That's what Luke said," she replied with that god awful dreamy look on her face again.

"So, what happened then?" I prodded, trying to get her back on track.

Her phone buzzed, signaling that she was receiving a text. I groaned. I was never going to hear the rest of the story.

Linda got a big grin on her face and I knew it was hot neighbor. I grabbed my cigs, a lighter, and the room key, along with my phone. I signaled to her that I was going out so she could have privacy with *Luke* and went out to call Joe back. I knew he'd be asleep soon.

When I got back to the room, Linda was in the bathroom. I grabbed a bottle of water and got settled into my bed, waiting for her to come out and finish her story.

She walked out, ready for bed, grabbed water for herself, and got into bed.

"Oh, no, you are not going to sleep until you finish the story, Lady Linda," I said as I took a big swig of my water. "I have been on this journey with you all these years, so I deserve to hear the juicy details."

Linda rolled over and looked at me with a snarky grin on her face. "I wouldn't dream of leaving you out, *Diva*." Of course, she put emphasis on the nickname.

"Out with it. We have to go to sleep eventually tonight."

"Okay, okay, chill. So, anyway, where did I leave off?"

"He finagled his way into doing the photos for the event," I said impatiently. She was going to drag this out, I could tell.

"Oh, yeah, well, after he got the gig, he said he scrambled to get things ready, got a friend to housesit and hit the road. Oh, before that, he told me he'd been wanting to ask me out for a long time but was chicken. Then he kissed me." The dreamy look appeared again.

That must have been at the time I'd seen them.

"He caught up to us and tried to stay behind us most of the trip. He said it was hard to do it without us noticing him, but he wanted to surprise me. I told him we thought it was him a few times but decided that was impossible."

"And? Where do you go from here? And what about the chick he was supposedly seeing?"

She laughed. "The chick is his sister, and that's who is housesitting for him. As for us, we are going to try dating and see where it goes. Now, can I get some sleep? I'm supposed to meet him for breakfast at nine."

"Okay, okay, go to sleep."

We turned out the lights then, and soon we were both in dreamland. I can almost guarantee I know who she was dreaming about.

Well, I'm sure you're wondering what happened after that. They met for breakfast the next morning. We said

goodbye to everyone and started the long trip home. Hot neighbor followed us, making sure we were safe on the road. He stopped when we did, and Linda was ecstatic.

They were sickeningly happy. Of course, I was happy for them, but seeing them together made me miss my Joe even more. We did have fun on the way home, though. We stopped along the way at some places we'd missed going out there.

Finally, we were in Florida. Linda and Luke came in with me, helping me with my bags and we introduced Luke to Joe. They hit it off immediately. We invited them to go out for dinner, and they agreed. Then we invited them to spend the night and drive the rest of the way home the next day.

Now, it's six months later and they are still going strong. We've signed up for the California event again, only this time, Joe will be going with us. Luke will be the photographer.

Linda finally got her man, and she didn't even have to use duct tape.

The End

About The Authors

Anne Welch grew up in a very small town in South Carolina, where as a kid, she always loved to read books, make people laugh and write songs. After having success in her home state she decided to pursue dreams of becoming a writer and moved to Nashville, TN. When she's not writing you can find her reading or searching for a husband. She loves spending time with her friends, nieces, nephews and her two fur babies. She enjoys making people laugh so if you would like please feel free to follow her on [Twitter @merri_aw](#) or on [Facebook.com/itsanannething](#). Or visit her website at [www.annewelchauthor.com](#). She loves hearing from her readers.

International bestselling author, Anna Kristell, is a small town gal from southern Indiana with a passion for romance. She has lived in Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, and now resides in Florida with her husband, where she enjoys sunshine and beaches.

An avid romance reader since her teen years, it has always been her dream to create love stories of her own.

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